

## Closer than Breath

*These appearances exceed me and I'm distributed into a weird, intangible intimacy. Appearance never expresses the whole, or let alone anything greater than the whole. Hyperobjects disappear "downwards," not upwards, into something paradoxically more physical and thus more fragile than the beings that comprise them. This explains for instance the viscosity of hyperobjects, the fact that they stick to you phenomenologically wherever you are. Their hyperphysicality is what makes them so sticky, closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet: the mercury in my cells, the radiation streaming through my DNA. The subsistence we discover in hyperobjects suggests we might already have passed across a limit confining thought.*

- Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*

Sometime in June 2019, at a screening of a developmental work that marked the beginning of their ongoing curiosity around the intractable hyperphysicality of plastic, artists Tess Campbell and Sam Mountford meet scientific researcher Peter Puskic, who shares with them his investigation into the sublethal impacts of plastic ingestion in seabirds. Because Campbell and Mountford are interested in how their work might dissolve the conditions of knowledge (to which we are attached), as well as reorienting fields of visibility (as alternative ways of 'seeing'), they are excited to engage further with Puskic, to observe the methods he undertakes around the questions he is forming.

Over a two-year period, Campbell and Mountford absorb the haptic processes associated with Puskic's research, which are simultaneously clinical and visceral, meticulous and fraught with potential seepage. The material researched is corrupted and fragile, indexing an impact felt across cellular and geographic contexts, reflecting varied temporal registers. The artists' engagement with the research and the lab environment contributes to their practice of being creatively susceptible. 'Susceptible' derives from Latin *suscipere* 'take up, sustain', from *sub-* 'from below' + *capere* 'take'. To be creatively susceptible is to be open to, receptive to, vulnerable to, and defenceless against. To be taken in.

In *Boundaries*, Campbell and Mountford create a multi-dimensional environment for their new film *On the Shoreline* to be taken in. Adopting a biomimetic approach to their gallery installation, they draw on the spiral structure of a seashell, or the pattern of an ocean eddy, to construct an architectural framework that is at once internal and external, open and enclosed, to navigate and view sequences of their film. The curving structure, which echoes its own form, enables a porosity of viewing through its skeletal frame, allowing the light and sound from each discreet film sequence to seep across the screening spaces, a kind of contamination. Utilising various lens-based technologies, the film explores frangible states of observation and vision, meshing the processes of scientific research with the fathoming of personal stories, conflating the temporal and spatial scales implicit within our contemporary materials and lives. *Boundaries* proposes a softening of edges, anticipating how something might contaminate, be enveloping and closer than breath.

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If you were to look downwards into a brightfield microscope, you would look through the ocular lens of the eyepiece, down the short body tube and through the small and spherical objective lens, which bends light towards your eye, making an object, illuminated from beneath by a beam of light passing through it, appear larger than it actually is. If the microscope is powerful enough, you could observe the object at its cellular level, allowing you to see the shape of a cell, its nucleus, mitochondria and other organelles. Microscopes scale us down into an intimate universe, allowing us to see a world puzzlingly greater and more infinitely complex than the form that contains it.

If you were to look upwards into the night sky through a telescope, a large and curved piece of glass would gather light from a distant object in that darkness, bending and focusing that light down a long tube towards a second curved piece of glass, the eyepiece, which magnifies the image, bringing it to your eye. The shape of the lens concentrates light, and it is the electromagnetic radiation that is emitted, absorbed or reflected from a distant celestial object that you would see when you look into a telescope. Telescopes siphon astronomical objects from their infinite space. Their distant light spills into our eyes, where the luminosity information is sensed and transmitted by receptors on our ganglion cell membranes, discharging a sequence of physiological impulses, illuminating the dark spaces of our imagination.

If you were a Blackmagic 4K pocket cinema camera and you were unable to resolve a sharp image, you would run through your full focus-range while you chase any form for definition. If the contrast in the field of view is measurable, then your motor will stop and you will have found a focus point. If a defined resolution is not reached, then your motor will 'hunt' until it finds something to focus on. This is auto-focus hunting, where shapes, colours and light become soft and merge, capturing surprising relationships between indeterminate forms of visual information.

If your eyes were in fact feelers, they would be organs of touch that extended out from your body, as an antenna or tentacle might feel its environment. If the act of seeing was an act of touching, the way you see the world would be understood as tactile rather than merely visual, and the tactility of visual experience would mean that you could be touched, and therefore affected, in a profoundly felt way. Seeing would no longer be a separated observational experience, rather it would be an embodiment of perception, a haptic visuality.

Seeing would be touching.

Touching is intimate.

Seeing is sticky.

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The migratory feats undertaken by the Flesh-footed Shearwater are extraordinary. Typically, before embarking on their northern post-breeding migration, they head south of the Antarctic Polar Front to feed on cold water upwellings rich in

zooplankton and predatory fish. They then travel approximately 15 – 17 thousand kilometers north to the Arctic, returning the same distance, a migration that takes place annually.

Increasingly, the shearwaters have become litmus tests for physical and chemical pollutants within their marine habitats, and more broadly indicators of greater ocean health. The prevalence of the ingestion of ocean plastic debris leads to the substantial compromise of their vital energy and flight-ready integrity, significantly impacting their capacity to complete this essential migration.

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Some notes on ingestion:

The word ingest derives from the Latin verb *ingere*- 'brought in', from *in-* 'into' + *gerere* 'carry'.

To ingest is an act of accepting. Physiologically it relates to the process of taking a substance into the body through swallowing or absorbing. Ingestion also refers to the cognitive act of taking in; information, knowledge, skills, beliefs. To receive into the mind and retain. To absorb, assimilate, imbibe.

A bolus (from Latin *bolus*, "ball") is a soft mass of food and saliva that forms in the mouth during the act of chewing. This masticating process follows the preliminary phase of ingestion, and under ordinary circumstances, the bolus is swallowed and moves down the esophagus to the stomach for digestion.

Ingestion of foreign bodies typically occurs when a non-edible object is swallowed and enters the digestive tract. The foreign body may be regurgitated with the bolus, or become lodged somewhere in the digestive tract where it acts as a contaminant, irritant or cause of critical blockage. Regurgitation and the incapacity to digest are acts of rejection.

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The plastic fragments extracted from the bolus and digestive tracts of the shearwaters range in scale, form and colour palette, and while they have been modified by the mechanical and chemical processes of the digestive system, softening their shape and tone, they endure, unable to disintegrate, suspended in a state of hyperpersistence. Campbell and Mountford scan their focus over these semi-digested fragments extracted by Puskic, floating out, separated from any functional or visceral context. The muted qualities are strangely beautiful and disturbing, haunting indicators of an impact which is impossible to grapple in its entirety.

Campbell and Mountford also scan their focus over the interior and exterior environments of Airbnb properties that fringe the coast. As habitats of temporary occupation, they too float out, separated from any authentically lived context, with the residual traces from itinerant visitors gleaned from sight and touch. While, like the plastic fragments, they persist in their littoral terrain, they are also permeable,

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susceptible to being breached, exposing their interior to the elements of the shoreline they are perched on.

Through the lens of geo-science, a shoreline can be defined as the physical transition between water and land surfaces, where the dynamic nature of this boundary is modified by the preceding, current and future action of the body of water that impacts it, as well as the topography and composition of the land.

Through the lens of ecological philosophy, a shoreline might be thought of as a phenomenon that holds endless relationships between shifting forms and energies. The dissolving conditions of force and fragility, a kind of turbulence, might bring the things that are proximate and difficult into a temporary sharp focus, to be seen with intent, causality and stickiness, before their definition softens and they disappear.

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